White Kids

Language, Race, and Styles of Youth Identity

MARY BUCHOLTZ

White Kids

Language, Race, and Styles of Youth Identity

Mary Bucholtz

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

White Kids

In *White Kids*, Mary Bucholtz investigates how white teenagers use language to display identities based on race and youth culture. Focusing on three youth styles – preppies, hip hop fans, and nerds – Bucholtz shows how white youth use a wealth of linguistic resources, from social labels to slang, from Valley Girl speech to African American English, to position themselves in their local racialized social order.

Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in a multiracial urban California high school, the book also demonstrates how European American teenagers talk about race when discussing interracial friendship and difference, narrating racialized fear and conflict, and negotiating their own ethnoracial classification. The first book to use techniques of linguistic analysis to examine the construction of diverse white identities, it will be welcomed by researchers and students in linguistics, anthropology, ethnic studies, and education.

MARY BUCHOLTZ is Professor of Linguistics at the University of California, Santa Barbara.

For Jon

Preface

The origins of this book lie in California, where I did my graduate work and where I am now a professor, but the issues I confronted there stayed with me when I took my first academic post in Texas. In both places historical divisions between black and white are obvious, yet they take different forms in each. In California, the construction in the post-World War II era of the three interstate highways that converge in West Oakland (not far from the bungalow in South Berkeley that I rented while I attended graduate school) disrupted the surrounding neighborhood and its largely low-income African American residents. The new throughways formed a transportation corridor that further facilitated so-called "white flight" from Oakland to the surrounding suburbs. In Texas, State Highway 6 (which runs through College Station, home of Texas A&M University, my first employer) divides the small town of Calvert, separating the black descendants of tenant farmers from the white descendants of landowners in ways that are still starkly visible today.

Such dividing lines are a central issue of this book. While it is clear that the binary separation of black and white is as socially and culturally artificial as it is biologically baseless, academic theories of multicultural diversity and post-modern fluidity have had little impact on American racial ideologies, even in states with large and diverse populations such as California and Texas. Roads are imaginary lines that have real consequences for where people go and how they understand their position. Roads can be crossed, they can be jackhammered into dust, but their foundations are laid in the earth and their traces are not easily eradicated. The following pages examine how the imaginary lines of race, so deeply inscribed in American society and culture, shape young European Americans' experience of being white and how this experience is articulated in their social practices, especially their use of language.

This book is the product of many years of work, thought, and discussion, and it could not have been written without the generosity of many people. Above all, I thank the students, teachers, parents, staff, and administrators at Bay City High School, who trusted me enough to let me enter their lives during a period in the school's history when such trust did not come easily. Sue Ervin-Tripp, Leanne Hinton, Robin Tolmach Lakoff, John Rickford, and Barrie Thorne provided

Transcription conventions

All names in transcripts are pseudonyms; some identifying details have been changed. Each line represents a single intonation unit (a chunk of discourse bracketed by brief pauses and marked by a single intonation contour), except when the purpose of the transcript is to illustrate content rather than interactional structure. Phonetic details are included when they are relevant to the analysis; otherwise spelling is normalized.

.	end of intonation unit; falling intonation
,	end of intonation unit; fall–rise intonation
?	end of intonation unit; rising intonation
!	raised pitch and volume throughout the intonation unit
↑	pitch accent
underline	emphatic stress; increased amplitude; careful articulation of a segment
:	length
=	latching; no pause between intonation units
–	self-interruption; break in the intonation unit
-	self-interruption; break in the word, sound abruptly cut off
(.)	pause of 0.5 seconds or less
(n.n)	measured pause of greater than 0.5 seconds
@	laughter; each token marks one pulse
n@	nasal laughter
h	outbreath (e.g., sigh); each token marks one pulse
.h	inbreath
[ ]	overlapping speech
[₁ ₁]	overlapping speech in proximity to another overlap
( )	uncertain transcription
#	unintelligible; each token marks one syllable
< >	transcriber comment; nonvocal noise
{ }	stretch of talk to which transcriber comment applies
<[ ]>	phonetic transcription
" "	reported speech or thought
boldface	linguistic form of analytic interest
. . .	omitted material

Phonetic symbols

The following charts provide a rough approximation of the value of the International Phonetic Alphabet symbols used in the text, based on General American English pronunciation. The symbols are arranged roughly according to place of articulation.

Vowels and diphthongs

[i]	beat	[u]	boot
[ɪ]	bit	[ʊ]	book
[ej]	bait	[ou]	boat
[ɛ]	bet	[ɔ]	bought (Eastern US accent)
[æ]	bat	[ɔj]	boy
[a]	buy (Southern US accent)	[ə]	but (unstressed)
[aj]	buy (nonSouthern US accent)	[ʌ]	butt
[aʊ]	bout	[ɑ]	robot

Consonants

	bilabial	labiodental	interdental	alveolar	postalveolar	palatal	velar	glottal
voiceless stop	[p] pie			[t] tie			[k] kite	[ʔ] uh-oh
voiced stop	[b] buy			[d] die			[g] guy	
nasal	[m] my			[n] nigh			[ŋ] king	
voiceless fricative		[f] file	[θ] thigh	[s] sigh	[ʃ] shy			[h] high
voiced fricative		[v] vile	[ð] thy	[z] zoo	[ʒ] vision			
voiceless affricate					[tʃ] chin			
voiced affricate					[dʒ] gin			
approximant	[w] wide			[ɹ] rye [l] lie		[j] you		
flap				[ɾ] city				

Diacritic symbols

ː	vowel lengthening
ʰ	aspiration
˜	nasalization
̯	dental

Contents

List of figures

List of tables

1   White styles: language, race, and youth identities

Introduction

At Bay City High School, a large, multiracial urban public school in the San Francisco Bay Area, race was a frequent topic in classrooms, hallways, and the schoolyard. But it was also an uncomfortable topic for many students, who preferred not to be racially labeled. One such student was Damien. A tall, thin sophomore with pale skin and wiry light brown hair, Damien was a talented artist and athlete who spent much of his time at school with a group of African American boys. His speech was influenced by African American Vernacular English, the linguistic variety used in his friendship group, and his clothing and hairstyle reflected current African American youth fashion. Damien attracted the curiosity of a number of his classmates of all ethnoracial backgrounds, because they could not figure out whether he was in fact black, and he himself refused to discuss his racial identity. By controlling this information and affiliating with African American youth language and culture, Damien was able to present an identity that aligned him with his friends without allowing others to categorize him racially.[1]

Damien's situation, which was unusual but by no means unique at Bay City High School, presents a number of challenges to commonly held views of identity as either a social category or a psychological state. First, individuals do not passively inhabit identity categories to which they have been assigned; rather, they negotiate and navigate these categories in a variety of ways within social interaction. As a result, the social classification of any given individual is not necessarily obvious to others, and one's assigned social category is not always the same as one's social identity. In the above case, for example, Damien's classmates were unable to classify him racially, and although some students believed he was European American, he did not embrace this category as his racial identity, at least at school.

Second, identities are not merely a matter of individual psychology. They are fundamentally the outcome of social practice and social interaction, because it is only within and by means of interaction with others in the course of daily

activities that identities become evident and consequential, to oneself as well as to others. Damien's affiliation with African American youth culture, after all, was only evident because of the ways in which he displayed his involvement in that culture through his speech, his activities, and his choice of friends. Nor are identities entirely based in individual subjectivity, for how one presents one's own identity is shaped by how one interprets the identities of others, and an individual's self-presentation may be quite different from how she or he is interpreted by others.

Third, no single aspect of identity is independent of other aspects. Race and ethnicity are not separable from other components of identity such as gender, social class, sexuality, and so on, and an individual's identity cannot be arrived at simply by listing the social categories to which she or he is assigned. Identity instead operates as a repertoire of styles, or ways of doing things that are associated with culturally recognizable social types. Individuals position themselves stylistically and are stylistically interpreted by others as they present themselves within a given social context as specific kinds of people who engage in particular social practices. These styles go well beyond familiar demographic categories like race and gender to encompass entire ways of being in the social world – from talk to clothing to everyday activities – that involve more culturally specific sorts of identities. In this way styles create distinctions within as well as between broad social categories: Damien's style, for example, was influenced by African American youth culture, but other styles were available to students at Bay City High School, and each of these local styles was inflected by race, gender, social class, and other broad dimensions of identity.

This book is rooted in an understanding of identity as the social positioning of self and other. Social actors may take up various kinds of positions with respect to one another (Bucholtz and Hall 2005): similarity and difference, or *adequation* and *distinction*; realness and falseness, or *authentication* and *denaturalization*; and legitimacy and nonlegitimacy, or *authorization* and *illegitimation*. While these identity relations – and no doubt others besides – often work together, considering each of them and their component parts separately is analytically valuable, since it allows for a greater degree of specificity about the sorts of positions and relations involved in particular instances of identity construction.

Based on ethnographic fieldwork that I conducted in the mid-1990s at Bay City High School, in the following chapters I examine how white teenagers in the multiracial context of the school used language along with other social practices to position themselves both stylistically and racially within interaction. Scholars have recognized for decades that language is vital to the processes through which identities are created, mobilized, and transformed. The so-called "linguistic turn" or "discursive turn" throughout the humanities and social sciences has called attention to the ways that language brings the social world

into being. But much of this scholarship, coming as it has from outside of linguistics and related fields, focuses on some aspects of language and not others, and often what is termed *language* or *discourse* in this research is quite different from the object of investigation in studies conducted by linguists. One central goal of this book is to demonstrate that the conceptual and analytical tools of sociocultural linguistics further enrich the study of identity all across the disciplines by revealing in delicate detail precisely how language is pressed into service as part of ongoing identity projects, as well as how the identity work of individuals is implicated in larger sociopolitical structures and processes.

My decision to focus primarily on European American students in my analysis emerges from the specific historical, cultural, and geographic context in which I did my research. At the time of my study, Bay City High had no racial majority; the two largest racialized groups were European Americans and African Americans. But these two groups encompassed a wide range of variability, and I became interested in the diverse ways that white youth positioned themselves stylistically in relation to one another as well as to students of color, and especially to black youth. I also noticed that even European American teenagers with different styles racially positioned themselves in strikingly similar ways. Due in part to widely publicized and highly sensationalized racial tensions between black and white students during the time of my research, many students, teachers, parents, and community members viewed the school as racially divided. In this context, my study became an examination of how European American youth linguistically constructed a range of identities for themselves and others within the ethnoracial landscape of Bay City High School at a time of significant racial turmoil.

The experience of white students at Bay City High in the mid-1990s was part of a much larger ethnoracial shift that is still taking place across the United States, a shift in which youth are at the very forefront. Even within the extremely diverse San Francisco Bay Area, the setting of this study, many adults live in largely white social worlds. Their children, however, often do not. Public schools are increasingly sites of ongoing cross-racial encounter, as school populations become "majority minority" – that is, predominantly composed of students of color – not only in California but all across the United States (e.g., Prescott 2008). As the relative numbers of European Americans decline in public schools, white students confront race and especially their own whiteness on a daily basis, sometimes for the first time in their lives.

But even those white youth whose schools remain more or less racially homogeneous may also encounter racial difference through their engagement in youth culture. For the past two decades, many European American teenagers have had to take some sort of stance toward the dominant form of African American youth culture, hip hop, which has emerged as the most influential form of youth culture both nationally and internationally in this time period.